

\threat\paradigm
Saturday, 16 Sept 1988

New paradigm: Threat, Risk, Self-esteem (CYA, Blame-avoidance, averting humiliation/perceived failure/defeat/loss of status)

Yesterday, Julie Margolis suggested that I proposed to rule out or ignore the factor of "accident" as a source of risk in the nuclear era. I protested that I fully accepted all the factors of accident and "malfunction" and "miscalculation" or miscommunication that anyone else recognized. My difference from most others was that I did not limit my sense of dangers to these. I would add--indeed, as an even larger likelihood--the possibility of deliberate, "calculated" ("rational"--in the limited, technical economist's sense) decisions by leaders of the sort that Americans elect to office, in situations of a kind that have arisen or "nearly" occurred in the past.

[Consider case of the Vincennes. The equipment did not fail, allegedly. (Note the strong tendency in American discussion to exonerate the technology, and to sustain the tendency to acquire it and rely on it, both for reasons of profit and "religion/loyalty.") No one did the equivalent of turning the handle the wrong way--opposite to intentions--or flipping the wrong switch.

The captain's decision is still defended, by his superiors and by the media, as prudent, reasonable, rational, correct, even obligatory ("If anything, he delayed too long--I would have fired earlier").

Yet...

Note that his decision was strongly shaped by a sense of what his superiors wanted, how they would react to various choices--what priorities they assigned to errors of different kinds--and his sense was correct. Also, his decision was shaped by what the captain of the Stark had done, how it had turned out, and what happened to the captain. (In this way, this is an example of a "linked crisis" of the kind I noted in my crisis study in 1964; the system was "cocked," ready and prone to make an "error of the first (?) kind," to fire when not appropriate, a false alarm attack, because of "passivity" in an earlier crisis, or an earlier under-rated threat.

(A sub-category of this is the risk of false alarm during a crisis or alert; the dangers of misinterpreting, say, a nuclear accident that occurs during an alert, or a false radar warning, and executing plans. The cascading of threats/crises: compounded both of an increased likelihood of certain kinds of accidents or warnings during an "emergency," and the higher likelihood of interpreting them ominously, along with the increased readiness to react.)]

Thus, the captain of the Vincennes was facing a sharpened prospect of humiliation/loss of command if he failed to fire when (it might turn out) it was appropriate to do so. (Just as the Soviet air defense commanders and pilots--confronted by KAL-007--were influenced by the prior failure of the air defense system to attack an intruding reconnaissance plane, and the subsequent demotion and punishment of those who failed to do so. (Another "linked crisis").

This particular case is not, on its face, an example of Presidential decision-making, but that appearance is deceptive. The captain's presence in the Gulf was a clear case not only of a governmental decision but of a choice by the President himself, in which he did not have much encouragement within or outside the administration.

That choice clearly involved risks, which were consciously accepted at various levels, of just such a challenge, decision, and outcome; whether or not this was clear to the President himself, it was to others, who commented on the prospect in advance. Finally, the President, and his high subordinates, did endorse the captain's behavior, I believe sincerely; he was right to believe he was acting as they wanted.

In escalated circumstances not too different from those that obtained in the case of the Vincennes, his authorized alternatives, and actual choice, might have included a nuclear air defense or antisubmarine weapon, or even a tactical offensive nuclear weapon. (This possibility is in addition to the possibilities that he might have fired such a weapon by mistake--I have heard uncorroborated reports that this did happen once during the Vietnam war, by a Navy plane; and Admiral LaRocque reports that his own ship was about to fire a nuclear airdefense weapon by mistake during an exercise, when he himself observed its red-painted tip from the bridge and averted the firing--or, in the heat of battle, might decide to do so without authorization and against the real wishes of his superiors).

The possibilities of authorized, or approved, choice might well have arisen from an escalation of the battleship shelling of Lebanon in 1983 (which might well have been followed by a successful attack on the battleship by a missile, and by attacks on Syrian SAMS with deaths of Soviet advisors...). It could easily have arisen during the Falklands war in 1982, when the commodore had nuclear weapons, was reported to have prior authorization to use them in defense if needed, and when unlocated Argentine submarines posed a serious threat to troopships including the QEII.

Thus, I believe the risks of nuclear annihilation are higher than rated by most people--not only members of the Reagan

Administration, but most people in the peace movement, and especially "arms controllers" like Herb York (or even my friends Mort Halperin and Chris Paine)--not because I deprecate the risks of accident or "madness" (by clinical, or Western standards: looking at the Ayotollah or Khaddafi or Amin) but because I add to these even higher likelihoods of nuclear operations initiated by "normal" Western leaders, and subsequent escalation both deliberate (by high-level command) and "uncontrolled."

Indeed, I know more than most about the actual risks of "loss of control" or miscalculation at various levels, from my studies of command and control in 1959-61. And I am almost alone, still, in my knowledge of Presidential delegation, which adds a significant chance of an authorized initiation, possibly based on a false alarm, at a level below the President. But my overall calculation reflects an unusual awareness of Presidential calculation and choice in "crises": not only nuclear crises, but the kind that occur every week. And an awareness of the tendency for Presidential decisions to get implemented, even when--by standards that are usually applied only by outsiders, after the event--they "clearly" should not have been.

Very specifically, I rate highly the possibility that a "normal" President, in the process of carrying out a non-nuclear threat that has failed to influence an adversary in the Third World, and confronted in this process either by costly stalemate or an imminent tactical defeat--either of which appears humiliating and politically dangerous--will further threaten, and if the threat is unsuccessful, carry out, initiation of tactical nuclear operations.

In doing this he would be gambling--recklessly--that concurrent US threats of further escalation or preemption in the event of nuclear response by the Soviet ally of our opponent will either deter or at least sharply limit any such response, so that US first-use will remain unilateral or, at worst, nuclear operations will be limited to the immediate area of the conflict (away from the US or its European allies).

If a major nuclear war does come about in the next decade, I believe it will probably have emerged in this fashion. This has been the focus of my concern for the last decade. The new leadership in the Soviet Union, and possible response to this in the US (under Democrats--though even they do not guarantee a new response) may change this emphasis in the next few years.

But even if the major risk does shift to emerging Third World nuclear states (where most analysts have seen it, exclusively, all along) it will be still be based, I believe, on a quite comparable mechanism, in imitation of past and present superpower propensities, rather than--primarily or exclusively--on "accident" or clinical or non-Western forms of "irrationality."

This is to say that I think the almost exclusive concern with "accidental" or "miscalculated" war is misguided or misleading, insofar as it distracts attention from the possibility that a high-level decision-maker, probably the President, might deliberately choose to initiate nuclear operations or to escalate them.

And he might well do this not on an ad hoc basis but precisely in circumstances that had been foreseen as significant contingencies in gaming and planning and in which--given his actual state of information, with its inevitable uncertainties and errors--nuclear first-use had been foreseen as a reasonable or perhaps essential response. Indeed, it might well have been explicitly threatened in these circumstances, either long beforehand or in the immediate events. And whether threatened or not, elaborate preparations for this response would have been made long in advance.

Miscalculations, errors, misunderstandings, failures of communication, and simple random accidents, all of these there will also be in the actual events; of that we can be certain. But those making the plans and preparations earlier, and the decision-maker in the crisis, are not in every respect simpleminded. They are more than likely to understand the possibility of such "disturbances" (though at the same time, experience shows that they are likely to underestimate their scale and impact).

What I am predicting here is that despite being experienced and "sophisticated," they may well have decided--in a way that appears in retrospect incomprehensibly reckless--to "accept" these risks of mistaken, catastrophic action in planning or deciding to respond to certain states of uncertain information. Indeed, that is precisely the state of NATO planning as it has existed for close to forty years.

By whatever sequence of events it might be triggered, the carrying out of such preparations and contingency planning, exactly as planned--and perhaps threatened--in the belief that the precise circumstances obtain for which the plans or threats had been made, is not accurately described as the occurrence of an "accident." This is true even if the belief is in error, or if--as it will turn out--the planned response is deeply, catastrophically foolish and has many consequences that were not earlier foreseen.

At least, such an initiation or escalation of nuclear war would be an "accident" whose nature, timing, and character had been shaped by a vast purposive effort of intricate and coordinated planning, training, arms development, production and deployment, threats and commitments, and high-level intent that under some circumstances the catastrophe in question would unfold more or less exactly as it did.

If most others seem to me to ignore or underrate the likelihood of this quite special form of "accident"--a "highly preplanned and prepared accident/miscalculation,"--I see this as in part due to differences in experience and perspective.

But I also see it as a general difference in paradigm, where theirs--the prevailing paradigm--underrates the role and importance of the factors underlined in the "formula for nuclear disaster" presented above. These factors--(1)gambles, (2)threats, and (3)avoidance of humiliation--are, I believe, inadequately conceptualized in the everyday cognition both of the public and of elites and experts, and their role and importance correspondingly unrecognized.

I would add two other factors for which the same is true, both implicit in the example of the Vincennes and in the formula above. One is the tendency to (4) obedience, commitment and conformity, and the motives that underly this tendency.

The other is the prevalence of (5) covert (concealed, denied) divergence of values, aims, and actual strategies pursued by leaderships from those declared to, and preferred by, the mass of their followers (the "sovereign public") and the corresponding secrecy and lies by leaders so as to pursue their actual covert aims, often by unacknowledgeable means--illegal, immoral, brutal or reckless means--without revealing these actual aims or means to the public, Congress or courts.

I have listed these factors--underrepresented and inadequately conceptualized, I believe, in most existing analyses and everyday thought--roughly in the order that I myself came to appreciate their importance.

My undergraduate thesis and later my Ph.D. thesis dealt with the description and role of uncertainty and risk-taking in decision-making. My doctor's thesis included a brief history of the conceptualization of uncertainty and probability, a critique of current analysis in terms of subjective probabilities, and a new concept of "ambiguity" and actual, reasonable responses to it.

Just in the last decade, empirical investigations by Kahneman, Tversky, Slovic and Lichtenstein and others, and new conceptualizations by them and others reflecting these new findings, have greatly advanced ability to describe and predict actual behavior under uncertainty. Yet these recent findings--or even the earlier, "classic" focus on uncertainty--have scarcely yet penetrated even expert analysis of international political behavior, let alone popular discussions; nor have the researchers above yet attempted to apply their findings or concepts in this area.

My Lowell Lectures--on The Art of Coercion--in 1958 presented a conceptualization of the process of threatening as a means of pursuing goals, and applications to the understanding of international politics. As in the case of uncertainty, I found this process to be poorly understood, both analytically and in terms of its actual importance and concrete forms, not only in the abstract economic theories of choice but in contemporary political discussion, both elite and popular. And this still seems to be true, 30 years later.

In all these various forums, discussion very commonly proceeds as though neither uncertainty nor threats were essentially influencing the calculations or decisions of leaderships, or as if the discussants had no sound notions as to how these considerations might shape decisions.

As I observe it, the typical discussion proceeds "as if" the discussants were unaware that the behavior they were talking about involved gambling or threatening, and usually both. Nor do they give evidence of knowing a language, or useful concepts and hypotheses, or relevant empirical findings, that would help them understand and discuss such phenomena, if they did recognize it.

Threatening, including activity and declarations to support and strengthen threats, to make them adequately credible and effective, is very commonly "what is going on" in the arena of political behavior. Yet this simple fact seems rarely recognized. Still less does one find application of the body of concepts and propositions that have emerged from the seminal work of T.C. Schelling, or the work of myself and others.

And virtually all threatening (except for occasional naive confidence that a threat is certain to be effective) involves gambling, choices made under varying degrees of uncertainty as to consequences. Yet, up to this moment, there has been no attempt to apply the latest findings on behavior under uncertainty, such as those of Kahneman and Tversky (or my earlier work on ambiguity, which is now attracting renewed interest), to the professional analysis of coercion, let alone to popular discussion.

These lacks in both expert and popular discussion bear directly on what I have come to see as a current US societal misapprehension of the greatest importance. On the one hand, many experts and most of the public--even while they do perceive the US buildup of both nuclear and conventional arms in terms of "deterrence," i.e., as supporting threats--fail to understand the actual nature of the threats these weapons are meant to convey, and thus fail to explore or judge the interests these threats serve, the possible alternatives, or the circumstances under which these threats might be carried out.

Specifically, they are unaware that most strategic nuclear weapons are developed and selected for production and deployment so as to strengthen capability--and thus, the credibility of threats--to escalate a nuclear conflict or to launch a strategic preemptive, disarming first-strike, rather than to deter an enemy's first-strike by posing a capability to retaliate after enemy warheads had exploded. In turn, this strategic threat-capability backs up threats of, and preparations for, U.S. first-use of tactical nuclear weapons if needed in the course of conflicts, initially non-nuclear, involving U.S. interests overseas, more probably in the Third World than in West Europe.

On the other hand, largely because of this ignorance of the actual nature and circumstances of the threats involved, but even, as well, to the extent that--at certain moments or in some contexts--elites or the public do understand the relation of these weapons and forces to actual threats, they tend to underrate the contribution of the arms buildup on both sides to the risk of nuclear war. This contribution is positive even when the threats "work" but, of course, it is strongest when they do not.

In divorcing the armament- and threat-process from the risk of war--as polls suggest both public and experts do--they reason as if the threats which the arms and deployments support were certainly and exclusively "bluffs," certain not to be carried out if they fail to produce compliance. In actual fact--to one like myself with inside knowledge of the secret planning, aims, and proclivities of high-level decision-makers under what they perceive as intense challenge--this appears an extremely unreliable estimate.

Moreover, they appear oblivious to the dangers that may accompany a process of threatening even when those making the threats, and supporting them, conceive and intend them solely as bluffs.

In both these respects, professional analysts of political behavior seem badly to have failed to enlighten the public --or even to appreciate, themselves--on the realistic dangers of the current nuclear and conventional arms buildups and "modernization."

Polls by Yankelovich and others since 1984 show that "experts" see these dangers as steady and very low. The public--like me--sees the danger of nuclear war as being much higher than the "experts" believe, but--in contrast to my belief--as being relatively unaffected by the mutual arms buildups, which they deplore as being wasteful but not as adding to the risk of war. Indeed, they tell pollers that they would not see the risk of nuclear war as being markedly affected either by a doubling or by a halving of mutual US/Soviet weapons inventories.

Of course, my own analysis of the risk of nuclear war does not depend primarily on questions of numbers, but of types of weapons and their deployment, along with the aims, plans and strategies these weapons and deployments serve. The public tends not to make this distinction, and much of the antinuclear effort, e.g. from the Freeze movement, has not encouraged them to do so.

Under current programs, doubling the stockpiles would go along with "modernization," i.e. with new weapons of a particular type, a type which I regard as particularly ominous and dangerous, significantly increasing the danger of nuclear war. "Halving"--as proposed by both sides under START--might either decrease or increase instability and the risk of nuclear war, depending on which weapons were destroyed and what new, "modernized" types (including SDI defenses) were simultaneously added to the inventories.

(Dukakis, in opposing most of these new weapons--thus exposing himself to the charge that he would weaken our defenses--seems to do so on the grounds that they are unnecessary and wasteful, where I am mainly concerned about their danger. I infer this from his support for the Trident II missile or D5, which I regard as particularly dangerous, while he opposes Midgetman, a weapon that is, as he says, unnecessary but is much less destabilizing than the D5.)

[Insert here a discussion of no-first-use, as advanced by Jackson, in relation to public attitudes supporting bluffs; these same attitudes, unfortunately, support the arms race.]

Those who wish to rely upon a threat--even if they support it only so far as they conceive it to be a pure bluff, and would not wish it to be carried out in any circumstances (this is the attitude of the majority of the public in supporting first-use nuclear threats in Europe)--will tend to support actions and declarations that strengthen the "credibility" of this threat.

Thus, a threat-policy, supported by the taxpayers, shapes actual military capabilities and forms of readiness, adding some and foregoing others, perhaps even deliberately destroying certain capabilities in the interest of shaping adversaries' expectations and strengthening certain threats. (Under Eisenhower, non-nuclear capabilities were not modernized and in some respects were deliberately eroded, both for budgetary reasons and to strengthen threats of nuclear "massive retaliation").

A little-noticed implication of this is that a threat-policy which the administration permits to be regarded as perhaps involving pure bluff (specifically, US explicit first-use policy

in West Europe) unites in support of certain programs of arms-buildup "supporting" such threats two rather different groups. The first of these--comprising the majority of the American public--supports the threats only as bluffs, only on their understanding that they would in no circumstances be carried out.

Whatever the private beliefs of members of the Administration, they do not systematically or forefully contradict this widespread understanding, except to make verbal assurances to the alliance and the Soviets that the threats are not bluffs. In recent years such assurances have been undercut by contradictory statements by authorities like Kissinger or McNamara, to the effect that to carry out the plans would be irrational, unthinkable, and surely undesired by the allies themselves, so that the public is permitted to interpret the recurrent assurances as simply part of the process of bluffing.

On this interpretation, this large part of the public supports the production and deployment of weapons without which the bluff would be less likely--or as the administration puts it, without any chance--to succeed in convincing the adversary. That is, this implicit reasoning has been sufficient to win their support--in the absence of mutually agreed halt or reductions, which they would dearly like to see but which Administration has told them was unobtainable from the Soviets--for the U.S. part of the arms race, the hugh DOD-programmed arms buildup.

This public support is seen as inexplicable, "irrational"--and is often unforeseen--by critics of the arms race who describe these weapons, such as the D5, as having "no other function but first strike--which the American people doesn't want to support." The fact, adequately hinted by the administration and intuitively perceived and supported by the public, especially those more concerned and informed, is that the D5, like the more vulnerable MX, does have another function other than carrying out a first strike (or generating profits and jobs); it can and does support threats of carrying out a first strike. And such threats can serve the useful and broadly supported purpose (whether they are truly essential or not) of deterring Soviet invasion of Europe or escalation of a limited conflict.

The second group of supporters of enlarged and "modernized" forces--whose existence is scarcely known to the mass of the public--is very much smaller, elite and more influential. Like the mass of the public, they want to have the capabilities to threaten, credibly, wars of various kinds. Nor do they desire, in their pursuit of the Cold War, to bring about a large-scale, prolonged non-nuclear war, still less a two-sided nuclear war, any more than the rest of the public. No one wants either of those.

But this elite group of analysts, officials and interested parties, both inside and outside the government, does differ from

the mass of the public (as well as from the minority that totally rejects the arms race and the process of military threats) in two respects. They are much more willing than the rest of the public to risk these undesirable occurrences--large-scale, prolonged conventional war or two-sided nuclear war--in pursuit of certain objectives.

And in pursuit of these objectives--not supported, or given much lower priority by many others in the public--they are very much more ready to contemplate or initiate what they hope and expect to be short or small-scale conventional wars, even at some perceived risk that such a war might escalate or prove to be prolonged.

Some--not many, but specifically under Reagan a highly-placed and influential fraction--of this elite group are even willing to contemplate and recommend the limited first-use of tactical nuclear weapons, if necessary to break a stalemate, avoid a tactical defeat, or to win a conventional conflict in the Third World. That is, they support certain nuclear threats that they do not regard inevitably as being bluffs; they support acquiring certain capabilities in the belief that it might well become desirable and necessary to use them in combat.

They do not hope or desire that this would be necessary--with the exception of a still more limited number who think that a few actual uses would be useful, and might be essential, to make subsequent threats sufficiently credible and effective. And none of them hope or desire that any such use would escalate to two-sided nuclear war, whether limited or general. As I have said, I believe no one of any influence wants that.

Yet it would be misleading to say--as I almost found myself writing must now--that "no more than any others do they desire..." Indeed, they do not desire such outcomes; but that formula might appear equivalent to, "no less than others in the public do they wish to avoid...". And the fact is that their concern to avoid such escalation is less than the rest of the public (or other elites), as measured by their willingness to risk it, in pursuit of their actual objectives.

The overwhelming majority of the American (or world) public would be unwilling to take the risk of escalation to two-sided or general nuclear war implicit in any limited first-use for any objectives they can conceive, even when the alternative put to them is the Soviet overrunning and occupation of Western Europe. They would almost surely have the same judgement even if they put the risk of Soviet nuclear response as low these "superhawk" elites might conceive it to be.

However, the point upon which I launched some time ago is that both of these groups, however disparate in these crucial judgments,

can and do agree to support capabilities for carrying out threats of large-scale intervention, of nuclear first-use and of escalation. In uniting behind appropriations for these capabilities, the larger group, which delivers the majority support needed, is not even aware of the divergent judgments and expectations held by the small elite--influential by virtue of official or advisory position and because of the interests it represents and serves.

But as a result of this coalition of forces behind new, "modernized" capabilities precisely shaped to carry out and thus make more credible a variety of threats--strongly motivated, as well (if not more) by its generation of profits, jobs and regional votes--these capabilities do come into existence, while others erode or are eschewed.

Thus when challenging "crises" arise--when gambles are lost, initial threats fail--Presidents find themselves with an instrumental set of alternatives, offering certain forms of capability and readiness and omitting others, that would not have existed in the same form if the threat-policy had not been proposed to the public and accepted by many of them (by many, as "bluff") in the first place.

To understand the role of threats, we must not look only at the choice among given alternatives in a particular crisis, a "static," timeless analysis. It is necessary to look at the threat-process over time, looking--among many other things--as its evolving effect on the capabilities, the set of alternatives, that present themselves for consideration at any particular point.

In 1988, we stand on the threshold of deploying capabilities--purchased with majority support for increasing the credibility of bluffs--that will have a strong tendency to convert what were bluffs in the past into a general nuclear war (via first-use and then, limited two-sided use) in a future crisis. They will increase the risk of nuclear wars, of all kinds, in ways that the public hardly imagines or takes seriously.

Still, to understand how this can be--how any leadership in a crisis could be so "foolish, so reckless, so irrational" as to utilise these capabilities--one must understand the realistic bearing of the other factors mentioned above: the fear of and response to humiliating failure; the covert objectives that define what occurrences national elites see as failures and humiliations; and the willingness of subordinates to follow leaders--who are seeking, recklessly, to avert such failure--in implementing tactics these subordinates recognize to be futile, immoral, or wildly dangerous.